

Homesteading in Oregon Video Transcript

BLM Logo

Title: Homesteading in Oregon

Location: Baker City, Oregon

Date: 2010

Featuring: Gordon Colton, Rancher

Sarah LeCompte, Director, National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center

Fred Warner, Homesteader's Great Grandson

GORDON. It's just a, I think, a very pretty valley. I mean it's surrounded by mountains and hills, and a lot of it is natural wild hay meadows that have never been, never been farmed. From the time that it was homesteaded, they're still just exactly the same today as they were back then.

GORDON. I guess maybe that's what I like a lot of it... is we don't just have a real big population here. It hasn't changed in a hundred years.

GORDON. Just over here about a quarter of a mile we got a spot there in the Muldoch slew that has a gravel bar. It was the only place that the wagons could find to get across that slew without miring down. There was so much traffic went through there that the ruts are still visible today. My dad did put up some posts to protect a short strip of it there. So that it would never be plowed or farmed until it wouldn't be there."

GORDON. Parts of my family come over that trail. And that would've been 150 years ago I guess.

SARAH. Over 300,00 people came westward on trails and about 50,000 of those people settled in Oregon and they started the state of Oregon and settlement in Oregon, and it's had a lasting impact both on the organization of the state and on the culture of the Pacific Northwest.

FRED. My great grandmother come on the Oregon Trail in 1864, the reason they came here was because Missouri was a swing state and they was getting close to the age of people that would have to fight in the war, so my great grandfather said we're going to get out of here and they joined a wagon train and come to Oregon.

FRED. It was very trying thing. The roads were so rough that they had to load and unload their wagon 6 times to get up the trail, although at that time they didn't have too much stuff to load and unload, because they dumped it off along the trail.

SARAH. Well, in Oregon they had a precursor to the Homestead Act called the Donation Land Act, and that was a primary reason why people came west, to get that free land, followed closely by mining.

SARAH. When mining was started here in Baker in 1862, it started the economy and allowed people to settle. It had a huge impact. Within one year there were 5,000 people here, there were additional roads, homesteads were started, farms were started. It had a huge impact. It was a primary economic driver in Eastern Oregon, and it wasn't the biggest gold producer in the West, but certainly it was one of the many mining areas that allowed people to move place to place looking for their dreams, looking strike it rich.

FRED. My great grandfather was sort of a sporting man and he liked to gamble, he got into a poker game in Baker city in '65, 1865, and he won this ranch, and we've had the ranch since that time, and there have been seven generations lived in this house. It's got a lot of memories, I'll tell you that.

SARAH. On the early cadastral survey maps, you see they early ones, they were not square they were set up next to a stream or by geographic boundaries and you could tell those early people got first choice, they got the prime land, and it's evident on the cadastral maps that they got some excellent land.

SARAH. You still have visitors here, I believe every BLM office, still has people coming in wanting to know if they can homestead still even though there's not been any homesteading, any program since the 1980's, those were all phased out. People are still fascinated by it; they're still interested in opportunity. It's still a timely question we get at any BLM office.

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